

***Ethical Decisions for Social Work Practice, 7th edition, by Ralph Dolgoff, Frank M. Loewenberg and Donna Harrington***

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First published in 1985, *Ethical Decisions for Social Work Practice* is perhaps the most widely cited ethics text in our profession. But the authors would seem to imply that such ovations are not necessarily the best measure of appropriate utility. Now in its 7<sup>th</sup> edition, the authors not only suggest, but model their contention that ethical considerations must be regularly reexamined in the light of emerging and evolving personal, societal, and professional responsibilities.

In turn, the authors do not shy away from contemporary controversy; rather, they challenge us to examine the depth and interplay of our own personal and professional perspective. In spite of the acknowledgement that our work is social, the authors observe that we often feel alone or isolated in our obligation to make difficult ethical decisions, particularly when such determinations cannot responsibly be delayed. So, how do we responsibly rise to such occasions? How do we choose between values emerging from multiple, sometimes apparently contradictory reference points in a diverse social environment?

The authors challenge us to expand the boundaries of ethical responsibility beyond the individual to the collective responsibility represented by our places of employment, professional associations, and state agencies. Such organizational systems as peer review and accountability, appropriate hiring, training and supervision practices, and ombudsman services for service participants can combine to promote a sustainable environment for ethical practice in the work place.

Prior to actually reading the book, I took it out on a test drive. Drawing upon practice experiences, I scribbled a list of ethical complications and determinations that had particularly challenged me, my close colleagues, and students. Then turning to the index, I sought to balance the authors' determinations against my own. What I found, rather than clear prescriptive solutions, was a validation of persistent struggles and processes. I was intrigued. This is not a cookbook with recipes and remedies. It is a tour book organized to help travelers recognize, understand, anticipate, and practice their response in a diverse and evolving practice environment in which we all tread. The readers are encouraged to constantly prepare themselves to reflect upon and ultimately

respond to potentially unique and present circumstances. Read from cover to cover, the work is straightforward and insightful.

As I draft this review, I am acutely aware of the almost nonstop chatter of moral absolutes emanating from a myriad of media sources. While some candidates, commentators, and educators are reducing significant domestic issues to easy concept words such as “choice” and “diversity,” “family values,” “intelligent design,” and “change,” the authors promote the perspective that virtually every decision in practice is imbued with complex ethical constructs. The challenge here is to recognize the ethical dimensions that influence practice determinations. Amid competing values and loyalties, role conflict, values dilemmas, ambiguity, and politics, how are social workers to remain mindful of such potential conflicts that swirl between both the immediate as well as the remote participants in the process of professional practice? Wisely, the authors encourage us to consciously and constantly link and re-examine our own behaviors and thoughts to such domestic, political, and historical precedent as exist within a global geo-political context.

Perhaps this work is most apparently valuable to students entering the profession. But the lessons here establish not only a foundation for ethical practice, they also offer a valuable refresher for practitioners and educators who might discover renewed strength, vision, and passion for their work. As the authors reflect on the academic’s role in *teaching*, they propose the contradiction that ethics cannot be so effectively taught, as they must be modeled and mentored through our relationships with learners, peers, and institutions. Such lessons must be infused though each lesson in the classroom, just as it is revealed in each encounter in the practice world.

This work provides a clear reminder that even the routine, seemingly pragmatic determinations in our daily practice depend upon conscious choices and the intentional application of knowledge and values. Perhaps every maneuver in our professional routine is at its base reliant upon a foundation of considered ethical practice.

A particularly valuable component of this text is the grounding of its lessons around 105 practice “exemplars.” Through these scenarios, the reader is invited to investigate a range of available, and on occasion contradictory or complicated, options. The examples represent a wide enough range of circumstances and environments to establish this text as a valuable core to the generalist foundation in our diverse practice environment. Nothing in our work is as simple or routine as we might wish. Few educators have the diversity of experience or the excess of time to

variously present such broad ranging opportunities to consider the potential challenges of our work.

In Chapter One, a particular scenario compelled me to reflect upon what I had previously thought of as a remote and personally unique experience. It was a time when clearly held professional values and obligations collided unexpectedly during the second week of September in 2001. Like the individual in the story, my training and experience led to my being called to work in this unfolding tragedy. Wonderfully supported by my family, co-workers, and employer, I was able to leave my home and job for this valuable but temporary assignment. Some weeks later on my return home and to my long time place of employment, I was approached by a valued colleague with a warm hug and a simple admonishment: “I’m glad you were able to help there. But we’ve really needed you here.”

The significant value of well considered ethical practice is an essential presence to our everyday practice. This work by Roger Dolgoff, Frank Loewenberg, and Donna Harrington goes a great distance toward establishing and maintaining that perspective.